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REVIEW

The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World, edited by Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, Routledge: London and New York, 2016, xiv + 266 p.

THE LIVES OF OBJECTS IN THE EARLY MODERN GLOBALIZATION

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It cannot be expected that the approach considered by this volume, lapidary positioned from the outset by the editors “at the intersection between global history and material culture” (p. xi), does not entail the involvement of all related disciplines, thus forming what might be called a kind of “hermeneutic ball”, at least not precisely in these times of disciplinary interconnection, reflecting what might be conventionally accepted as *the internal globalization of knowledge*. This perspective engages the consideration of knowledge as a “globe”, an inextricable network of cognitive disciplinary gradients, expressing themselves as differences rather than identities in the strong sense. Consequently, given the presence of an ideological content in any action or critical inquiry, in this framework, we could talk, even in great extent, nowadays, about *the self-globalization of knowledge*, a globalization that

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knowledge itself – naturally, through individuals and concrete policies – imposes as its determinative value.

One will “naturally” find here – *naturally* for the contemporary investigations of this type – aspects that mark the opening of history towards art, science, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, musicology, literary studies etc. It is important understand, however, that these aspects are not simply related to what might be understood as consecrated sub-branches of such domains: history of art, history of science etc. By themselves they are mutually connected, diluted, intersected, resulting thus hybrid approaches, even “fluid”, without a strict/classical framing not even in a narrower sense of the division of scientific labor.

Before proceeding to the critical analysis of the main arguments and thesis of this book, I will briefly provide some explanations on the theoretical framework that guides my exposure. If we are to conduct our inquiry using secondary sources of the current literature, then global history will show up as a peculiar type of history, one that starts directly from a reality simultaneously *globalized, which globalizes* (by involving concrete mechanisms, processes etc. through which the world becomes unitary, condensed, interconnected etc.; among them we can briefly mention the role accomplished by telecommunications and transports in this matter), and that is *globalizing* (being highly supported by speeches that draw – centripetally, I would argue – all the phenomena, processes and identities etc. in the explanatory sphere of globalization); in short, nothing can be addressed, understood or criticized nowadays, positively or negatively, outside this perspective. Relying on Diego Olstein’s argument, global history acts as an approach which “adopts the interconnected world created by the process of globalization as its larger unit of analysis, providing the ultimate context for the analysis of any historical entity, phenomenon, or process.”²

The collective research concentrated in this volume is claimed both from theoretical sources, mainly positioned in the last two decades of

² Diego Olstein, *Thinking History Globally* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 24.

the past century – such as the innovative contribution made by the volume edited by Arjun Appadurai in 1986 (*The Social Life of Things*) or by the volume of author signed by Daniel Miller in 1987 (*Material Man and Mass Consumption*) – and from the attempt of reconfiguring this interpretative tendency after a decade, through what the editors call “the global turn”, pointing to the manner in which globalization inherently affects the discourse of social sciences and humanities. The things, therefore, as they are thought now, “are not just things with social lives, but with global trajectories” (p. 3). In other words, the social character “added” to the things is diversified through multiple spatial and temporal ramifications that despite the fact that they do not engage the spatio-temporal compression, easily identifiable nowadays and specific to our society, genuinely express a necessity of historical approaches dealing even with the beginnings of modernity.

However, these global trajectories can be explicit (as it is the case of the still life of the XVIIth century, painted by Antonio de Pereda, put forward by the editors among their specific examples that also include objects of very different geographical origins) or less visible, in which case the researcher himself is meant to carry a complex and clarifying hermeneutic effort in this sense. Nevertheless, we should add the fact that from this perspective, things do not only represent objects that are simply moved from one side of the globe to another, in accordance with certain elements, somewhat static, of “departure” and “arrival”. In a particular manner, the editors announce that “we are not only interested in trajectories that span time zones and geographical variations, but we are concerned to explore the transformative impact of these trajectories on the goods themselves” (pp. 13-14).

The linear representation of the commerce of things, reminded here, is at least problematic, if not misleading, as far as it ignores or disregards a multitude of processes that give a complex and fluid identity to all these apparently rigid routes. Consequently, their perishable destinies are forgotten, as it happens also with the involvement of the human and concrete subjectivities (with their passions and needs, partially induced by our society), the alterations of sense – rather substantial – suffered by objects among these routes, or

the changes suffered by the different cultures themselves that intersect with or contribute to the respective destinies.

What is at stake, therefore, is an “internal” route, more complicated, in which a certain thing accumulates different senses along the way – “meaning is created in layers” (p. 18), as the editors mention in their introductory study. Implicitly, this means that “to see the objects as things with global lives, we need a repertoire of disciplinary, methodological and conceptual tools, so as to draw on a variety of insights, ranging from art history, archaeology and anthropology to literature and historical studies, especially global history” (p. 8) (However, let us note, once again, on the occasion of this statement, that globalization is not a simple internal category of this new type of discourse, but a producing category, that remodels the discursive structures themselves, hence, a meta-category.)

The research is structured and gathered around three types of objects that engage the presence of globalization in their analysis: “objects of global knowledge”, “objects of global connections” and “objects of global consumption”, corresponding to the three engines that produced – from this perspective – the globalization, within the framework of the early modernity, configuring what the editors recall as “the first so-called global age” (p. 19): science, trade and consumption.

At the heart of this argument is the observation that certain objects, mainly the luxury ones or those having a cultural / symbolical distinguished value, have largely circulated, being either desired or changed etc. also before this period, at what cautiously might be understood as a *global level*. Nevertheless, the editors Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello point out that “...from the late sixteenth century onwards, then, we not only see the long-distance trade in high-value luxury goods for the elite markets, but ever-growing regular flows of commodities traded in bulk across vast distances” (p. 4) (in a slightly altered form, on p. 6 it is stated that “from the early Sixteenth century onwards, the then, the world of trade began to transform the world of goods”)

Although they are aware that extended generalizations on the favorite objects of these global connections cannot be obtained in a few introductory pages, the editors suggest, however, in the introduction, some minimal ideas that guide the reader on the path through this

world that has already begun to be particularly animated in modernity, starting with silver and ceramic items or textiles.

This volume emphasises, undoubtedly, the expression of the overwhelming importance that materiality gained in the contemporary culture. The quotidian society, marked by materiality through its diverse features is – somewhat simplistically expressed – a materialistic society. But it is a materiality of a particular type. In fact, we could say that we live in a time of the necessary mixing in which what is commonly called a spiritual or soul element etc. is necessarily expressed through material elements (objects, environment), and the material is reinterpreted by widening its meaning, assuming the inclusion of the elements belonging to the former. Relative to the last point, in a sense an object is “detached” from its own material support, it is intensively “colored” by all that aspects representing his interactions with the human, from the ideas, needs, practices (both individual and collective), which have led to its appearance, to what constitutes its “life” – the trades, utilities, desires, exposures etc. in which it is caught. A subtle, complex phenomenology emerges here, overcoming the dualism that characterized, for a long time, the European culture.

This aspect is highly observed by one of the authors, Pamela H. Smith, who, starting from the contributions of Raymond Tallis and Tim Ingold, argues that “in the reciprocal process between matter, hand, cognition, and intellect, natural material and the human body mingle. Indeed, tool use and the acquisition of skills can perhaps ultimately be viewed as an evolutionary process of interaction between humans, the human body, and the environment.” (p. 31).

This hypothesis is confirmed as long as we consider the many aspects that depict the manner in which the human body is involved in shaping the early modernity: its involvement in processes of manufacturing as a means of verifying certain properties of materials, as a source of certain used substances, as a model for various natural processes found in those used substances, as a repository of knowledge (understood as *habitus*) that is transmitted from one generation to another providing benchmarks for measuring various features of things etc. (p. 33).

Furthermore, additional meanings (and their different mixes thereof) also result from the manner in which objects join one another,

during our experiences. Referring to those *Kunstkammern*, as cabinets of curiosities that preceded the constitution of the modern museums, Gerritsen and Riello highlight that “early modern collections combined natural and man-made products into a single unifying system, raising important questions on the distinction between natural and artefacts things” (p. 10). Here lies the starting point of the approaches that aim to reveal the complexity of motivations that lead to all these considered juxtapositions and gathering of things.

As the editors cautiously mention, in terms of methodology, the readers will not only meet in this volume the approaches that favor studying the social processes and phenomena on longue term, which involve categories of objects, but also what they call a “micro-methodology reminiscent of the ‘cultural biography’ approach”, which is extensively concerned with the “individual experiences” of certain manufactured objects (p. 23).

The contributions grouped in the first part of the volume start from a quite revised understanding of what was commonly appreciated until recently as science. Accordingly, instead of focusing on what the modern science of nature as a theoretical embodiment of an evolutionary process – exclusively European – would be, the authors rather prefer to consider elements depending on the so called *cultures of knowledge*, or particularly, the scientific culture.

Moreover, beyond the role played in shaping the European modern science by the fact that its exponents were caught in a complex, global network of relationships, interactions or exchanges, it will be highlighted in this context “the importance of collecting, understanding and displaying things for scientific development” (p. 14).

The texts signed by Christine Guth and Pippa Lacey explain the *interplay* of local and global on the modern destiny of two materials, the shagreen, respectively, the coral. Both critical inquiries retain the manner (which might easily be defined as dialectic) in which the production of such materials (enshrined in certain geographical areas and thus correspondent to the particular cultures within them) comes into contact, self-transforms and changes, in its turn the presumable knowledge assumed about these or the trade flows. Shortly, as noted by Pamela H. Smith, we are dealing here with “a reciprocal rather than linear process” (p. 31). Here, as well as in the study belonging to the

aforementioned author, “the interconnected nature of knowledge, shaping and shaped by the exchange of commodities and materials over vast distances” (p. 16) is recognized and discussed.

The second part of the volume contains texts that in one way or another contest the linear and simplistic representation of the commerce that I have previously mentioned. The articles focus on the manner in which *featherwork* in South America are marketed, perceived, (re)signified in the European context (Mariana Françoso); the different meanings that we can assign to the inventory (of 1600 pages!) belonging to one of the most impressive collections of objects from the XVIth century, remained after the death of D. Teodosio, Duke of Braganza (Nuno Senos); the objects utilized by the officials of Dutch East India Company in their relationships with the indigenous people, an interaction through which all these cultures mutually remodelled by engaging such objects (Susan Broomhall); the interaction between locals and the influent French minority from the Indian port Pondicherry, reflected by artefacts or objects listed in various historical documents, such as inventories, “ego-documents” etc. (Kévin Le Doudic).

According to the editors, these materials seriously put into question some of the fundamental premises and underlying assumptions of the classical analysis of the commercial exchange of that time: either Europe was seen as the absolute and privileged place of all these commercial networks, an outbreak to which all activities converged, also receiving their main significance, or those questioned exchanges were totally anonymous, as the people involved in them had never come with their own cultural collective heritages or individual particularities.

From this latter perspective it appears that, regardless the considered form of the trade, it “might involve networks of gifting and collecting; purposeful reinterpretations of the meanings associated with specific objects; or even the material re-shaping and transformation of objects through process of customisation, alteration, and re-combination” (p. 19).

Consequently, the articles from the last part of the volume fall under the assumption that guides the scientific debate of many contemporary studies in the field, namely that “the consuming habits of people in different parts of the world were reshaped by artefacts, commodities and technologies from other world areas or continents” (p. 19), particularly

concerned being, in this context, the *raw commodities*, not the *manufactured products*. Authors interrogate the history of the spread of tobacco in Russia (Mat Romaniello), the environmental effects of the implementation of various and large plantations of sugarcane in Central America and the Caribbean Islands (Urmi Engineer), the development of the coffee trade supported by the Hamburg port in the eighteenth century and the manner in which the consumption became focused on a restrained elite of the society (Christine Fertig and Ulrich Pfister).

These examples provided by the authors, both in terms of broad categories of material objects, and the micro-methodology of the individual, also mentioned by the editors of the volume, vary and can only represent the beginning of a more careful perspective on the role of material culture in transforming and shaping mentalities at a global level, highly accelerated with the beginnings of what will later be called modernity (more specifically, *early modernity*). Opening such a hermeneutical path, this book gives us grounds for a research program *sui generis*, for the globalization that (already) characterizes the early modernity expressed through material culture, a program with multiple development opportunities, some of them quite unexpected and unpredictable.